What is Existential Therapy *Not*?

Thomas Szasz

The world is there, the world is, not awaiting our interpretations but unresisting when we compose them, and it may be that the mere semblance of the world's acquiescence to our metaphor-making leads us deeper and deeper into illusion.

Joyce Carol Oates (1990: 212)

1

"History," observed Winston Churchill, "is written by the victors." Answers to questions such as, What is psychotherapy? What is psychoanalysis? What is existential therapy? are also written by the victors, that is, the proponents and practitioners of the particular activity.

Entering "existential therapy" into the Google search engine yields the following results, listed in order of appearance:

Existential Psychotherapy

*Existential Psychotherapy is a form of psychotherapy which aims at enhancing self-knowledge in the client and allowing them [*sic*] to be the author of their own lives... Its philosophical roots are to be found in the works of Kierkegaard, Heidegger, Sartre and other existential thinkers as well as Husserl and phenomenologists. Historically, existential therapy began when Binswanger attempted to use Heidegger's theory therapeutically, an approach that was adapted by Victor Frankl, Rollo May and others in the United States. ... In the UK there are a growing number of existentially-oriented therapists. The School of Psychotherapy based in Regent's College in Regent's Park, London and the New School of Psychotherapy near Waterloo, London, both specialise in the training of existential therapists and counsellors. The Society for Existential Analysis is a thriving international organisation which promotes the discussion of existential ideas and their application to psychotherapy.*

(http://members.aol.com/timlebon/extherapy.htm)

Existential Therapy

*Focuses on freedom of choice in shaping one's own life. Teaches one is responsible to shape his/her own life and a need for self-determination and self-awareness. ...Existential therapy focuses on the present and on the future. The therapist try's [*sic*] to help the client*

> *see they [*sic*] are free and to see the possibilities for their future... This type of therapy is well suited in helping the client to make good choices or in dealing with life.*
>
> (http://www.psyweb.com/psywebsub/MentalDis/AdvPsych.html)

Viktor Frankl

> *Author of* Man's Search for Meaning*, and 32 psychospiritual books. Developer of existential psychology and logotherapy. Holocaust survivor. "Ultimately, man should not ask what the meaning of his life is, but rather must recognize that it is he who is asked. In a word, each man is questioned by life; and he can only answer to life by answering for his own life; to life he can only respond by being responsible."* Man's Search for Meaning.
>
> (http://www.geocities.com/~webwinds/frankl/frankl.htm)

Cognitive Therapy Associates
Existential Therapy*.*

> *Existential Psychotherapy deals with basic issues of existence that may be the source of present conflict within a person. These concerns are universal, and inherent in the human condition: death, freedom, essential aloneness, and meaninglessness. ...Increased conscious awareness is key in becoming more healthy and fully functioning.*
>
> (http://www.cognitive-therapy-associates.com/therapy/existential-therapy.php)

2

There can be no mistaking the self-congratulatory tone of these and similar definitions of existential therapy. At the same time, it is painfully clear that a would-be client would, from such entries, learn nothing about what existential therapists actually do or are unwilling to do. Do existential therapists limit their interactions with clients suffering from "concerns [that] are universal and inherent in the human condition" to listening and talking with them (as I believe they should) (Szasz, 1965)? Do they prescribe drugs for them? (R. D. Laing did.) Do they incarcerate them? (Ludwig Binswanger and Viktor Frankl did.) Do they perform lobotomies on them? (Frankl did that too.)

Let us, then, ask, What is existential psychotherapy *not*? My answer is: It is not a treatment for a medical ailment, it is not any kind of "health service." This view rests on two pillars. One is an extension and application to existential therapy of my argument that mental illness is not an illness and psychotherapy is not a treatment. The other is a critical analysis of the adjective "existential," in "existential therapy."

In *The Myth of Mental Illness* and *The Myth of Psychotherapy* I showed that mental illnesses are the names we give to certain behaviors (unwanted by someone), not diseases, and that listening and talking is not medical treatment, but conversation or dialogue (Szasz, 1961, 1978). The terms "mental illness" and "psychotherapy" are metaphors, analogies running amok.

Critical examination of the word "existential" in existential therapy reinforces my earlier conclusions. Human existence is not an illness, hence it cannot be amenable to (medical) treatment. Characterizations of existential therapy – such as, "enhancing self-knowledge in the client," "focuses on freedom of choice in shaping one's own life," "existential psychotherapy deals with basic issues of existence" – are restatements, cast as "therapy," of the ancient Socratic quest for self-knowledge as the key to the "good life."

The only new element in the discourse is the introduction of the term "therapy" into it. Drop the term, and we are back in the old realms of philosophy (existence) and politics-and-law (freedom). Add the term, and we enter the realms of health care, healing, medicine (diagnosis and treatment).

There is no escaping this dichotomy, this choice. I surmise that many existential therapists are bitterly critical of my writings because I insist that psychotherapy has nothing whatever to do with illness, treatment, and medicine, and demand that psychotherapists firmly commit themselves to embracing or rejecting the "medical model" and its professional-economic benefits.

3

The medical paradigm and its evocative vocabulary provide the combination to the safe holding the virtually limitless "benefits" governmental health care agencies and private health insurance companies owe their beneficiaries, "entitled" to receive "treatment" for "illness." As long as "practicing therapy" is a (healing) profession and a way to make a living by providing third party-paid "health care services," it will matter little what the "therapy" is called. The therapists – existential, cognitive, psychoanalytic, and so forth – cannot and will not be moral agents responsible to their clients and their own conscience. They will be corrupted by those who hold the power to infuse meaning into the master metaphors – diagnosis, illness, treatment. Before long, they themselves will aspire to wielding such powers. In fact, they already do so.

Joyce Carol Oates is right: "the world's acquiescence to our metaphor-making leads us deeper and deeper into illusions," in the present case into the illusion that the challenge of life is an illness and that "certified experts" know how to cure it.

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